

Eco-sectarianism: From Ecological Disasters to Sectarian Violence in Syria

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Abstract

This study introduces ‘eco-sectarianism’, which is a new concept that explains the relationship between sectarian violence and environmental pressures in divided societies in the Middle East. Against the backdrop of climate change, ‘eco-sectarianism’ poses a challenge to many fragmented and unequal societies where the sense of national consciousness is weak and nation-building projects are incomplete. This paper draws attention to the links between politicisation of sub-national identities and emerging ecological challenges in Syria.

Key words: Eco-sectarianism, ecology, sectarianism, conflict, identity, Syria

Introduction

The relationship between the environment and armed conflict has been thoroughly studied in the past. Competition over productive or energy resources is widely accepted as a conflict trigger. In a similar vein, inequality between ethnically and religiously distinct groups has been linked to intra-state conflict over natural resources.¹ Nonetheless, in terms of evaluating the Middle Eastern sectarian clashes, environmental pressures have not been granted sufficient research. Due to the global hunger for energy resources, the Middle East is often viewed as a battleground where international interests collide over demand for oil and gas. This over-fixation with energy resources seems to be receding. Climate change crystallises as a verity and not just a notional topic discussed at international conferences and chanted at environmental marches. Ecological pressures are already causing economic losses and social deterioration on a global scale and have been officially recognised as a security threat.²

This study examines the relationship between ecology and sectarian violence. The authors argue that ecological issues can intensify the rise of militant sectarianism in the Middle East. In this light, we introduce the notion of ‘eco-sectarianism’ – a hybrid term which embodies

¹ Frances Stewart, ‘Crisis Prevention: Tackling Horizontal Inequalities’, *Oxford Development Studies* 23, no. 3 (2000) pp. 245-62; and Christophe I. Lang, ‘Environmental Degradation in Kenya as a Cause of Political Conflict, Social Stress, and Ethnic Tensions’, *CSS Environment and Conflict Project, ENCOP Occasional Papers* 12, no. 1 (1995), <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Publications/Detail/?id=246> (accessed 17 February 2016).

² Chris Abbott, Paul Rogers and John Slobodan, *Beyond Terror: The Truth about the Real Threats to Our World*, (London: Rider, 2007).

our conceptual framework. 'Eco-sectarianism' refers to politicisation of intra-religious binaries in fragmented ethno-religious societies where manmade or natural ecological problems such as famine and water scarcity regenerate sectarian narratives and deepen social division.

Competing intra-religious beliefs is not the causal factor behind the escalation of sectarian violence. However, their polarising characteristics are utilised for group mobilisation to compete over vital resources. Such rivalry has a seemingly sectarian outlook, but in reality, this type of identity politics has been aggravated by complex social, political, economic and ecological problems. Divisive sectarian perspectives and their utilisation by conflict entrepreneurs portray these problems as the trans-historical religious divisions - an 'inevitable' feature of every historical stage. Thus, sectarian narratives simplify the complexity of these socio-economic issues to serve group mobilisation.

When the key components of sectarianism such as cultural tribalism, moral supremacism and the politics of victimhood are fused with resource scarcity caused by ecological problems, a fertile condition is created for the escalation of conflict in fragmented societies. The parallels between ecology and violence are already established in many societies in the world.³ Nonetheless, 'eco-sectarianism' primarily emerges in religiously diverse societies where ecological problems are fused with *unsuccessful* nation-building projects. In the absence of a strong national consciousness, pre-modern social identities are more likely to play a dominant role in mobilising social groups which are under increasing ecological pressure to secure vital resources.

In the absence of formal trans-tribal, trans-regional, trans-sectarian pressure groups - and any

³ Mohamed Suleiman, 'Civil War in Sudan: The Impact of Environmental Degradation', CSS *Environment and Conflict Project, ENCOP Occasional Papers* 4, no. 1(1992) <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Publications/Detail/?id=238> ; Michael L. Ross, 'What do We Know About Natural Resources and Civil War?', *Journal of Peace Research* 41 (2004), pp. 337-56; Thomas Homer-Dixon, Nancy Peluso and Michael Watts, 'Exchange: Thomas Homer-Dixon, Nancy Peluso, and Michael Watts on Violent Environments', *Environmental Change and Security Report* 9 (Washington DC: Wilson Center, 2003), pp. 89-96; Lee Shin-Wha, 'Not a One-time Event: Environmental Change, Ethnic Rivalry, and Violent Conflict in the Third World', *Journal of Environment & Development* 6, no. 4 (1997), pp. 365-96; and E. Franklin Dukes, 'What We Know About Environmental Conflict Resolution: An Analysis Based on Research', *Conflict Resolution Quarterly* 22, no. 1-2 (2004), Special issue: Conflict Resolution in the Field: Assessing the Past, Charting the Future, pp. 191-220.

other effective institutions of civil society - religious identities horizontally bind individuals together and frame their demands within a cohesive, simplistic and seemingly legitimate framework. Vertical state institutions often lack legitimacy to provide an effective counter-narrative. Therefore, horizontal social agencies have an upper hand in framing the situation, standardising the narratives and synchronizing them across the community. Of course, ecological problems are not singlehandedly responsible for sectarian violence, but they can deteriorate the problem.

The Middle East is arid or semi-arid and therefore is extremely vulnerable to climate change.⁴ Droughts are a common natural phenomenon in this region. However, the 1998-2012 period is considered the driest one in the Levant since the sixteenth century.⁵ Droughts are predicted to reoccur with increased severity in the next decades because of climate change.⁶ A recent study reviewing water availability and climate change issued a prediction for the driest countries in the next few decades.⁷ According to the World Resource Institute, of the 33 countries that are expected to face extreme water stress by 2040, more than half are situated in the Middle East. Moreover, seven out of ten most water-stressed countries are in the Middle East.⁸ Access to water is a pressing challenge in the region and it will only be exacerbated by climate change.

Middle Eastern governments have a long record of water mismanagement.⁹ The region's natural resource governance has been a subject of long-standing criticism.¹⁰ The Tigris-

⁴ Robert T. Watson, Marufu C. Zinoyawera, Richard H. Moss, eds., *IPCC Special Report for Policy Makers, The Regional Impacts of Climate Change: An Assessment of Vulnerability*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

⁵ Benjamin I. Cook et al., 'Spatiotemporal drought variability in the Mediterranean over the last 900 years', *Journal of Geophysical Research* 122, no. 5 (2016), pp. 2060-74.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Andrew Maddocks, Robert Samuel Young and Paul Reig, 'Ranking the World's Most Water-Stressed Countries in 2040', World Resources Institute (2015) <http://www.wri.org/blog/2015/08/ranking-world%E2%80%99s-most-water-stressed-countries-2040> (accessed 11 March 2016)

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Nouar Shamout and Glada Lahn, 'The Euphrates in Crisis: Channels of Cooperation for a Threatened River', Chatham House, Energy, Environment and Resources Department, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/euphrates-crisis-channels-cooperation-threatened-river#sthash.grox71yE.dpuf> (2015); Thomas L. Friedman, 'Without Water, Revolution', *New York Times*, May 18, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/19/opinion/sunday/friedman-without-water-revolution.html?_r=0 (accessed 16 March, 2016).

¹⁰ Voss et al., 'Groundwater Depletion'; Shamout and Lahn, 'Euphrates in Crisis'; Friedman, 'Without Water, Revolution'; Colin P. Kelley et al., 'Climate Change in the Fertile Crescent and

Euphrates Basin has been rated the second fastest drying water basin in the world.¹¹ The countries in the region host a constellation of sub-national groups formed by tribal, sectarian and linguistic similarities.¹² These groups rarely share the spoils of political and economic power – in fact, most Middle Eastern countries are ridden by socio-economic inequalities.¹³ Thus, adverse climate conditions, droughts in particular, will further exacerbate existing social tensions and create new challenges for countries with diverse ethno-sectarian populations. Climate change, combined with the socio-economic dynamics of inequality, will aid identity radicalisation in the shape of ‘eco-sectarianism’.

This article aims to contribute to the existing debate about rise of sectarianism by introducing the new notion of ‘eco-sectarianism’ and applying it to the conflict in Syria. Our choice of case study stems from a number of factors. Firstly, Syria hosts a diverse population, whose Muslim majority subscribes to different Islamic sects. Secondly, the country has been severely affected by sectarian violence following the Arab Uprising. Most importantly, Syria’s large agricultural communities were acutely affected by drought, which implicitly influenced the public attitude towards the political status quo, and thus contributed to the instigation of protest movements which sparked the civil war.¹⁴

Methodology

Implications of the Recent Syrian Drought’, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 112, no. 11 (2015) <http://www.pnas.org/content/112/11/3241.full.pdf?sid=931c3765-8869-4f4a-be81-d7b9e93a5091> (accessed 24 January 2016).

¹¹Katalyn A. Voss et al., ‘Groundwater Depletion in the Middle East from GRACE with Implications for Transboundary Water Management in the Tigris-Euphrates-Western Iran Region’, *Water Resources Research* 49, no. 2 (2013), pp. 904-14.

¹²Willem van Schendel and Erik J. Zürcher, eds., *Identity, Politics in Central Asia and the Muslim World* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2001).

¹³Mthuli Ncube, John Anyanwu and Kjell Hausken, ‘Inequality, Economic Growth and Poverty in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)’, *Working Paper Series*, no. 195 (2013), [http://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Publications/Working%20Paper%20195%20-%20Inequality%20Economic%20Growth%20and%20Poverty%20in%20the%20Middle%20East%20and%20North%20Africa%20\(MENA\).pdf](http://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Publications/Working%20Paper%20195%20-%20Inequality%20Economic%20Growth%20and%20Poverty%20in%20the%20Middle%20East%20and%20North%20Africa%20(MENA).pdf) (accessed 16 March 2016)

¹⁴Caitlin E. Werrell and Francesco Femia, eds., ‘The Arab Spring and Climate Change: A Climate and Security Correlations Series’, Centre for American Progress (2013) <https://climateandsecurity.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/climatechange-arab-spring-ccs-cap-stimson.pdf> (accessed 16 March 2016)

This research adapts an inductive approach in order to generate a new perspective on sectarianism emerging from data. This research benefits from both primary and secondary data. Given the security challenges and the heavy presence of IS in Al-Jazira province at the time of undertaking this research project, it was difficult to travel to Syria to conduct interviews in person. In this light six semi-structured interviews were conducted via Skype and other online communication tools in Arabic and then transcribed into English. Employing semi-structured interviews ensured a greater flexibility in terms of letting respondents develop their ideas and also allowing for more discussion. It also afforded the interviewees the opportunity to express their points in their own words. The informants were approached through snowballing method. They are all, Arab, Sunni and males between the ages of 27 to 40. Although we actively tried to have a more representative sample, it was not possible to have a wider group of interviewees. All informants are either farmers or closely connected to the farming community in Al-Jazira province. They all connected to the rural communities in Al-Bukamal in Deir ez-Zor, Al-Hasakah and Raqqa. We have primarily targeted this province because it has been badly affected by ecological and environmental problems prior to the start of the conflict. Our interviews were conducted when ISIS was still controlling most of the region.

The safety and security of the interviewees was taken into consideration in all cases and accordingly in this article we use only their first names to protect their identity. Although these informants provide valuable insight into the issues central to this research project, the authors use a variety of sources to complement the interviews. As well as engaging with the relevant interdisciplinary literature, this study benefits from a number of other primary sources in English and Arabic. The authors have gathered data from various policy papers and environmental reports put together by leading international organisations. We have undertaken this research project by building on professional reports and surveys from The World Resource Institute (WRI), The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), The United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR), The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the World Bank and United States Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL).

Sectarianism, Inequality and Group Identity

The politicisation of sub-national identities has a complex character. Perhaps the most notable account for the dynamics of modern identity was attempted by Charles Taylor. He argues that personal identity is deeply intertwined with the social medium. Taylor stresses on the importance of intersubjectivity of self-referential value judgements and namely, how the individual perceives herself in relation to others¹⁵. Another pivotal point in Taylor's work are the socially constructed beliefs about the kind of life that is worth living. These are the beliefs informing choices in everyday life, also the aspirations towards the life deemed as 'deserved'. The dignity of self and others depends on how social roles are understood.¹⁶

Taylor's ideas resonate with Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory.¹⁷ It mandates that individuals orient in the world by categorising self and others in groups. Categorisation is done by different criteria and the important feature of each group is that individuals define themselves as members and this membership is reinforced by the collective. These categorisations serve as clarification in two ways: internally, as reference points for the self, but also externally – to classify and arrange the social environment. As individuals naturally strive to maintain a positive self-evaluation, they attribute value and importance to the groups they belong to. A crucial point in social identification is inter-group comparison.¹⁸

In the context of inequality, social identity is a guide to understanding one's place in the social hierarchy.

As far as the causes of sectarian radicalisation are concerned, relative deprivation theorists connect it to the inter-group comparison and marginalization. Identity escalation and social unrest have a complex dynamic relationship. Relative deprivation, a term popularized by Ted

¹⁵ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the self: The making of the modern identity*. (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1989).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner. 'An integrative theory of intergroup conflict.' *The social psychology of intergroup relations* 33, no. 47 (1979): p. 74.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Gurr in 1970 heralded a constellation of theories linking social perceptions of injustice with conflict and social identity radicalization. Relative deprivation is the perceived discrepancy between value expectations and value capabilities. In Taylor's terms – the discrepancy between what is seen as deserved and what is actually received. Values are social goods - access to education and healthcare, economic opportunities, political representation, etc. A more recent refinement of the effects of inter-group comparison and deprivation originates from the works of Frances Stewart Stewart links conflict in ethnically diverse societies with relative deprivation experienced by culturally distinct groups, which she calls 'horizontal inequalities'.¹⁹

Horizontal inequalities are social, economic and political inequalities between culturally distinct groups (while vertical inequalities occur between individuals). A crucial component in Stewart's theory is the distinctiveness of the social groups – they can be characterized as ethnically, religiously and/or linguistically distinct groups. Hence, social identification is enabled by common identity markers. Stewart concludes that religion is a stronger mobilizing factor than ethnicity, as religious movements tend to tap into generous international support.²⁰ Thus local movements who tackle horizontal inequality increase the chances for any sort of foreign intervention.

Horizontal inequalities occur when there are differences in the set of rights that social groups enjoy. Moreover, the dignity of a person and her respective collective is also undermined by such a discrepancy. This in turn triggers defence mechanisms, which enable the politicization of social identities.²¹ Stewart argues that equal access to education, economic assets and healthcare is the key to peace and sustainable development in religiously and ethnically diverse societies.²² The comparison between social identity groups should not reveal discrepancies in capabilities. These discrepancies may occur in terms of political participation, economic assets, income levels and employment; and social aspects. Water as a

¹⁹ Stewart, 'Crisis Prevention'.

²⁰ Frances Stewart, 'Religion Versus Ethnicity as a Source of Mobilisation: Are There Differences?', *CRISE Working Paper*, no. 70 (2009).

²¹ Alam Saleh. *Ethnic identity and the state in Iran*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

²² Frances Stewart, *Horizontal inequalities: A neglected dimension of development*. Vol. 5. Wider, (2002).

productive resource can be particularly important in agricultural areas with scarce rainfall.²³

It is evident that when services are ill-distributed between ethno-sectarian groups, grievances against the state and the dominant ethnic group are easily generated.²⁴ Stewart treats political representation as a social right that may become a subject of horizontal inequality.²⁵ Stewart's cogitations concept sends out a warning to the Middle East, as governments are traditionally dominated by one ethno-sectarian group. The security apparatus in many Middle Eastern countries is constructed upon sectarian, ethnic, tribal and familial ties to the established regimes.²⁶ Once the policing and the governance of a state are dominated by one ethno-sectarian group, it is easier to exert control on social movements. Some regimes have been criticized for drawing upon sectarian identity when forming their security apparatus – by boosting it with predominantly Sunni recruits.²⁷ Moreover, embracing a simplistic explanation for social unrest becomes more feasible - since the law and order are dictated by one group - the other disenfranchised group becomes targeted as a potential aggressor seeking retribution.²⁸

Eco-sectarianism

The above theoretical perspectives present valid and compelling arguments but are not exhaustive in explaining the new wave of sectarian violence in the Middle East. In addition to that conventional explanations such as interstate rivalry, state sponsored propaganda, foreign intervention and the consequences of the Arab Spring are influential, but not exhaustive in explaining the current sectarian violence in the region. The authors believe a crucial determinant is largely under-researched, videlicet: the environment.

²³ Frances Stewart, 'Root causes of violent conflict in developing countries.' *BMJ: British Medical Journal*, pp. 342-345 (2002).

²⁴ James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, 'Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War', *The American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (2003), pp. 75-90.

²⁵ Stewart, 'Crisis Prevention'.

²⁶ Williamson and Abadeer, 'Protest, Uprising and Change'.

²⁷ Melani Cammett et al, *A Political Economy of the Middle East*, 4th ed. (Boulder CO: Westview, 2015).

²⁸ Matthiesen, 'Sectarian Gulf'.

The link between environmental problems and social conflict is well-established. ‘While the precise roles of the environment in peace, conflict, destabilisation and human insecurity may differ from situation to situation and as such are still being debated in relation to other security and conflict variables, there are growing indications that it is increasingly an underlying cause of instability, conflict and unrest’.²⁹ It is well established that ‘environmental security is central to national security, comprising the dynamics and interconnections among the natural resource base, the social fabric of the state, and the economic engine for local and regional stability’³⁰

Having said that ecological problems alone cannot spark sectarian conflicts. However, when destructive environmental problems are merged with other detrimental factors such as social fragmentation, incomplete nation building, uneven development and political maladministration, it can set the stage for both politicisation and securitisation of sectarian binaries. It is widely accepted that bad environmental conditions have an impact on intercommunal dynamics.³¹ It is also evident that a strong sense of national consciousness and social cohesion can reduce violent intercommunal rivalry. However, in fragmented nations, where there is a pervasive sense of mistrust towards the state, sub-state identities surface as lifebelts to fill the void created by the state. As our case study in Syria suggest, pressing ecological problems strengthen the divisive sectarian narratives, emboldens the politics of ‘other-ing’ and fortify the socio-religious boundaries of desperate communities who unremittingly compete over fundamental resources and struggle for survival.

The relationship between natural resources and conflict, particularly in the Middle East, evokes images of oil and gas. Energy resources and their extraction, export and territorial

²⁹ Institute for Environmental Security, ‘What is Environmental Security?’ www.envirosecurity.org/activities/What_is_Environmental_Security.pdf (accessed 11 March 2016).

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Suliman, ‘Civil War in Sudan’; Lang, ‘Environmental Degradation in Kenya’; Shin-Wha, ‘Not One-time Event’; Dukes, ‘What We Know’.

specifics have been alleged triggers of inter and intrastate conflict alike. Nonetheless, environment and in particular water scarcity are equally potent, if not a more explosive, ingredient in conflict causation. As a source of livelihood, water is a crucially important resource. It has been argued that climate change and adverse weather conditions will bring a new set of wars that will be fought over bare necessities such as food and water.³²

In horizontally unequal societies social, economic and political rights are unfairly distributed in favour of the ruling elitist group.³³ For example, with regard to hydro-politics, such maldistribution may include water mismanagement, excessive or lacking agrarian subsidies, sanitation, humanitarian aid etc. However, in areas with existing socio-religious divisions, ecological problems and water scarcity may aggravate intercommunal rivalry and shift the focus from environment to identity politics. Since inter-group comparison is crucial to social identification and to the collective sense of belonging, horizontal inequalities fortify sectarian divisions which are based on exclusionary binaries of ‘us’ versus ‘them’.

The lack of adequate state response to ecological crisis feeds the public *perception* of a natural disaster as a local plight instead of a national catastrophe. In such a political climate, peripheral ethnic or religious groups are vulnerable to the politics of victimisation. In this light, rather than being a consequence of a natural cause and effect chain, environmentally caused impoverishment is likely to be seen as deliberate. In a time of an ecological crisis the state which lacks legitimacy cannot play a sufficient role in managing the public perception. Although the ecological crisis may have been caused by factors beyond the power of the state, the ruling regime will be perceived as complicit in the problem. As our Syrian case study demonstrate, in a fragmented society where discrimination is prevalent, the people who are affected by the ecological problems are very likely to perceive their dire situation as the result of divisive and discriminatory policies of the state.

While ecological catastrophes have economic and social consequences, they also act as push and pull factors. Scarcity triggers migration: large masses of people move in search of a new livelihood. That will create new chain of problems. Internal displacement and urban

³²Harald Welzer, *Climate Wars: What People Will Be Killed For in the 21st Century*, (Cambridge: Polity Books, 2012).

³³Stewart, ‘Crisis Prevention’.

migration require an adequate governmental response, new services, integration and ultimately, a form of social security. Environmentally-induced displacement often results in an influx of people into town and city areas, creating a new urban poor class. This process aggravates the tension between haves and have-nots – given the existing social fragmentation and politically cemented ethno-sectarian inequality, the affected social groups are likely to evaluate their plights through the lenses of identity politics. In other words, they are likely to see themselves as the victims of discrimination rather than environmentally induced problems.

‘Eco-sectarianism’ is a notion that ties the gulf between politicised socio-religious identities and the pressing ecological problems. ‘Eco-sectarianism’ is a political phenomenon occurring in divided societies, plagued by environmental catastrophes. Ecological pressures hold a great influence in regeneration of binary narratives in countries with incomplete process of nation building. ‘Eco-sectarianism’ poses a threat to segregated societies, as they are disproportionately vulnerable to shocks such as natural disasters and resource scarcity. At the time of a natural catastrophe, the lack of strong national consciousness and the alienation versus the favouritism of religiously distinct groups pave the way to fortification of sectarian identities.

When the fundamental elements of sectarianism like cultural tribalism, moral supremacism and the politics of victimhood are fused with resource scarcity caused by ecological problems, a fertile ground is created for violent intercommunal rivalry in fragmented societies. Indeed, in divided societies, competition over vital productive resources exacerbates the polarising narratives. In this vein, natural resource scarcity and mismanagement are simplified as part of the battle between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Indeed, at the time of ecological disaster, this social polarisation becomes particularly compelling because it is simplified through exclusive binaries of ‘black’ versus ‘white’ or ‘Sunnites’ versus ‘Shi‘ites’. The sense of religious ‘righteousness’ not only creates powerful mobilisation dynamics but it also provides the sense of legitimacy to resort to violence.

The societal fragmentation coupled with the incapacity of the states to deal with the

consequences of natural disasters *reinforces* existing sectarian sentiments, a process especially perilous in horizontally unequal societies. Environmental pressures exacerbate already existing tensions and religious or sectarian justification of inter-group violence is extremely problematic as it is built upon the understanding of a ‘divine’ right to restore justice and, what is more, the duty to punish the ‘transgressors’

‘Eco-sectarianism’ thrives in divided and insecure societies where national identity is still too fragmented. In these divided societies, nation-building projects have not been able to create cohesive national narratives, which could constitute organic bridges between various sects and ethnicities. In societies where national consciousness is weak, sectarian identities are often prone to politicisation because these pre-modern identities have not been effectively accommodated within the framework of modern nation-state. Hence, they still have powerful mobilising properties, because sectarian identities still carry their pre-nation-state socio-political significance. Various products of modernity such as nation-state could not create a neutral social sphere where people from various backgrounds could horizontally constitute united fronts to negotiate or even challenge the state.

Case vignette: Eco-sectarianism in Syria:

The Syrian civil war is a highly complex conflict which is not born in a socio-political vacuum. There were many influential factors which contributed to the escalation of violence. Although much attention has been given to both the regional and political variables, the ecological issues have been largely overlooked. We suggest that the ecological problems and the ways in which they were *perceived* by various social groups also have contributed to the escalation of violence.

The environmental pressures that plagued the country right before the uprising play an important, albeit overlooked role in the escalation of the Syrian conflict which had a sectarian overtone. The period 2004-2010 was marked by the most devastating drought in recent

Middle Eastern history.³⁴ Drought is by no means a novelty in the area, but the severity and reoccurrence of it, however, has been unprecedented.³⁵ Reports suggest that this might have been the worst drought since the dawn of agricultural civilizations in the Fertile Crescent.³⁶ Roughly three million inhabitants of the eastern Syrian provinces were affected by it, most of them being Sunnis. By 2009 over 800,000 people had lost their livelihoods and were faced with extreme hardship.³⁷

After the start of the drought, the Syrian government made a series of unsustainable decisions. Absolving responsibility for the plight of farmers was but just one of their miscalculations. Attracted by the high prices of wheat in 2006, the government sold its strategic reserves. Consequently, it was unable to provide adequate relief to the deprived agricultural areas. The government let go of its responsibility for water mismanagement and placed the blame on environmental pressures³⁸. As one of the interviewees affirmed:

The government kept blaming the global warming while we are aware that a great part of the problem was created because of its agricultural policies. Subsidies to peasants were cancelled and investment was channelled into other sectors.³⁹

Indeed, the government's reluctance to deal with the pressing crisis aggravated the feeling of inequality and generated narratives of victimhood among the Sunnis. In the past, there had been a frost affecting Alawite communities, which according to many Sunni farmers was swiftly addressed by the government. Many Sunni farming communities believe that their Alawite counterparts received support and compensation from the state while the Sunni communities were neglected. One of our interviewees Abdulrahman said:

³⁴Werrell and Kemia, 'Climate Change'.

³⁵Wadid Erian, Bassem Katlan and OudbleyBabah, 'Drought Vulnerability in the Arab Region: Special Case Study: Syria', *Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction* (2011). http://www.preventionweb.net/english/hyogo/gar/2011/en/bgdocs/Erian_Katlan_&_Babah_2010.pdf (accessed 11 March 2016).

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷UNOCHA, *Syria Drought Response Plan 2009-2010: Mid-Term Review* report (February 2010).

³⁸De Chatel, 'The role of drought'.

³⁹Ahmad, 26, Sunni Arab, Countryside of Al-Bukamal, 3 October 2016.

I believe that the government has fairly contributed to all people's impoverishment including the rural areas of its own sect (Alawite), but people in my region of eastern Syria usually underline the way how their problem of drought was treated comparing to the treatment of the Alawites' problem of frost. We remember that officials in Latakia and Tartus have offered a financial indemnity for the Alawites' damaged farms which is something did not happen in Deir Al-Zour east of Syria. The environmental specifics of different regions played decisive role here. Alawite areas are naturally rainy, while our areas have been suffering from drought and other ecological problems for many years. Nonetheless, the government responded positively to the Alawite case of frost in the coast and ignored every case in our Sunni region. Besides, the brutal response of the Alawi dominated regime to the revolution has added extra credit to these grievances, the thing that made the sectarian narrative regarding the agricultural management even falsely reasonable.⁴⁰

Another interviewee, Majid from Al-Hasakah, said:

The [Sunni] community in Al-Jazeera region has felt marginalised for a long time. Other sects get richer at our expense.⁴¹

These statements are perfect examples of politicisation of sectarian identity at a time of environmental problems. They show the ways in which the sense of mistrust towards the state can politicise intercommunal relations in a fragmented society where there is weak sense of national consciousness. Framing and evaluating the situation through the lenses of identity politics is evident here because the Alawites areas - Latakia, Tartus, Baniyas and Jableh - were also affected by the drought and neglected by the government.⁴² For instance, in Latakia and Jableh, as local produce growers were in need of irrigation water, they turned to using rainwater and river water. These alternative water sources were contaminated, causing

⁴⁰ Abdulrahman, 36, Sunni Arab, Countryside of Al-Bukamal, 4 October 2016.

⁴¹ Majid, 27, Sunni Arab, Countryside of Al-Hasakah, 6 October 2016.

⁴² Environmental News Service, 'Syrian Drought'.

numerous incidences of food poisoning.⁴³ The Assad government did not respond to the food poisoning and water scarcity in Alawite areas in any way. However, Sunni farmers still believed to be relatively deprived in comparison to Alawite farmers. As Lukman sees it:

High levels of corruption and nepotism were affecting the state's policies in many sectors – agriculture was not an exception. Many decision makers and government officials originate from the Alawite rural community. Thus they have managed to give more opportunities to their own community. It is common knowledge that the Alawites are ruling the country and they have never been fair to other sects and ethnicities. As far as I know, less than ten percent of people in Latakia are working in the agricultural sector. Nonetheless, the government was very keen to establish many projects to plant, promote and distribute the citrus fruits grown there. They helped the Latakian farmers export their products to the Gulf states, Europe and Egypt. The same assistance was requested here [in Deir ez-Zor, a Sunni majority area] but we did not receive anything.⁴⁴

Among the victims of the drought, small scale and subsistence farmers suffered worst. It has been estimated that between 2007 and 2010 herders in eastern Syria lost 80% of their livestock.⁴⁵ The drought triggered a wave of migration. Impoverished farmers, mostly Sunni, became environmental refugees, forced to abandon their homes and to settle into urban centres.

Migration statistics reveal that between 40,000 to 60,000 families sold their belongings and moved to cities.⁴⁶ The government set up temporary camps, however failing to provide good services for the displaced. Evidently, the 'cradle of the revolution' – the city of Dara'a was one of the urban centres that received numerous refugees. Moreover, there was already a strain on public services for the recently arrived 1.5 million Iraqi refugees.⁴⁷ The government's failure to address the pressing humanitarian crisis added to public dissent.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Lukman, 36, Sunni Arab, Countryside of Deir ez-Zor, 5 October 2016.

⁴⁵ Mahmoud Solh, Tackling the Drought in Syria, *Nature Middle East*, 27 September 2010. <http://www.natureasia.com/en/nmiddleeast/article/10.1038/nmiddleeast.2010.206> (accessed 16 March 2016).

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Kelley et al., *Proceedings of National Academy*.

It's clear, the environmental and climatic changes that plagued Syria eroded the already weak state-society relations. The economic difficulties that the population experienced were in stark contrast with the lavish life of the government-associated elite. While not all of its members belong to the Alawite sect, it was easy for sectarian binary narratives to thrive. This is not to say all rebel groups in Syria are driven by sectarianism. Many cities, caught in the middle between militias and the army, rely on secular local formations of various backgrounds to ensure the local security.⁴⁸ Having said that, there is still strikingly high number of militia groups with clear sectarian outlook. Despite the recent public obsession with the Islamic State, it is but one of the dozens of armed militias with sectarian tendencies crusading the country. One can exemplify both Ahrar al-Sham and Fateh al-Sham as other important militia organisations with sectarian agenda. Evidence from 2013 suggests that there are around 1,000 Sunni rebel groups that deploy about 100,000 fighters.⁴⁹

In addition, Syrian soil is trumped by tens of international Shi'ite militias, emerging mainly from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Hezbollah. Since 2012 there has been an influx of Shi'ite militias coming to the aid of the government.⁵⁰ Indigenous groups form a small part of these militias, while the majority - roughly 40,000 people - is drawn primarily from Iraq, Lebanon, Iran, Yemen, Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁵¹ Iranian backed Shi'ite militias step in to protect their holy sites and to assert the regime's positions. For most of the Sunni militia groups, success on the ground is unattainable without the support of the local Syrian population. Although they recruit foreign fighters, they heavily rely on the indigenous population for their activities. In this light, impoverished Sunni farmers become easy prey for the militias – financial incentives. The recruitment of the penurious Sunni farmers becomes easier when they witness the military force Al-Assad willingly uses on civilians.

⁴⁸ VICE news, *Rojava: Syria's Unknown War*, online multimedia, 2 January 2014 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p2zxIFQxkQ4> (accessed 11 March 2016).

⁴⁹ BBC News, 'Guide to the Syrian Rebels', news release December 2013. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-24403003> (accessed 17 February 2016).

⁵⁰ Phillip Smyth, 'The Shiite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects', *Policy Focus* 138(Washington DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2015).<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus138-v3.pdf> (accessed 17 February 2016).

⁵¹ Arosoaie, 'Shi'ite Militias in Syria'.

In the case of Syria, water as a productive resource is vital to the livelihood of a quarter of its population, which consists of mainly Sunni farmers.⁵² The loss of income and the mass urban migration contributed to the perception of horizontal inequality. As was discussed before, horizontal inequality represents unequal distribution of social rights between culturally distinct groups.⁵³ Sectarianism is fuelled by the perception that the government is controlled by the Alawite, while Sunnis are pushed to the margins. The mostly Sunni environmental refugees then generate dissent against the Alawite-dominated government. While the dissent is political, the grave socio-economic state of Sunni farmers fosters the loathing of the Alawite sect as a usurper and oppressor. The sense of sectarian victimisation transpired in the responses of our interviewees. Imad, a young farmer from rural Raqqa affirmed:

People in Alawite rural community have many agricultural projects and they easily export their agricultural products. By contrast, people in my region were not assisted and encouraged to export their harvests, despite the necessity of doing so. Another example is the giant dome vegetable farms: Alawite farmers were allowed to create them in addition to being generously compensated for any damage in their harvests. At the same time, giant dome farms were banned in the Sunni Al-Jazeera region. They will put you in prison if you just think about starting one.⁵⁴

In such divisive socio-political environment, jihadi recruiters appear to be presenting a ticket out of poverty and a route to political change, glorified by a sectarian discourse. Local fighters join not only because of financial incentives and ideological zeal, but also for political reasons. The humanitarian crisis that caused by drought aggravated dormant grievances. The feeling of abandonment and powerlessness, and of being betrayed by the government easily transforms into hatred and vindictiveness.

What is more, it makes it easier to differentiate between the group and the ruling elite drawing on sectarian differences. Therefore, 'eco-sectarianism' became one of the important

⁵²Friedman, 'Without Water'.

⁵³Stewart, 'Crisis Prevention'.

⁵⁴ Imad, 29, Sunni Arab, Countryside of Raqqa, 3 October 2016.

drivers of the Syrian conflict: the devastating drought that impoverished and displaced thousands of families contributed to both politicisation and securitisation of sub-state and supra-state identities which continued to break down the fabric of Syrian national consciousness. From the interviews we have conducted, it became apparent that after the start of the war, the Sunni identity started to matter more than during peaceful times. One of the interviewees, Mohammed – a middle-aged farmer from Al-Bukamal shared his feelings with us:

we, the Sunnis, were targeted by this fascist regime which showed its hatred to us in a very critical moment.⁵⁵

We observed the trend of victimhood in the responses of other interviewees, two of them – Imad and Ahmad even went as far as suggesting transnational persecution of the Sunni people. Ahmad stated that:

The fact that I am Sunni is more important to me than it was before the war. I do feel that today we are intentionally targeted.⁵⁶ I am not committed to any ethnic or sectarian identity, but at the same time I cannot doubt that Sunnis in Syria and Iraq were systematically targeted and displaced.⁵⁷

As environmental forecasts bode reoccurring droughts and water shortages, the risk of eco-sectarianism is escalating. The threat of water scarcity and sectarian narratives was a common realisation expressed by our interviewees:

When it comes to my local community, I am afraid that water shortage will continue to be one of the main threats. If we say in the short term, I think the struggle over natural resources will be inevitable.⁵⁸ Water shortage, Illiteracy,

⁵⁵ Mohammed, 40, Sunni Arab, Countryside of Al-Bukamal, 5 October 2016.

⁵⁶ Imad, 29, Sunni Arab, Countryside of Raqqa, 3 October 2016.

⁵⁷ Ahmad, 26, Sunni Arab, Countryside of Al-Bukamal, 3 October 2016.

⁵⁸ Interview with Abdulrahman, 36, Sunni Arab, Turkey

long term bitterness between local communities and the struggle over natural resources are the biggest long-term threats for my community.⁵⁹

Conclusion:

The new wave of sectarianism in Syria is a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon and cannot be attributed to a single cause. The current debate regarding sectarianism hinges on its political drivers – regional contestation, external intervention, horizontal inequalities and social exclusion, protest movements and their crackdown. The importance of these factors is undeniable in escalation of conflicts in places such as Syria. However, it is also important to accept the significance of ecological factors in the process of sectarian radicalisation. Although this study was not necessarily in search of the *casual* factor behind emerging sectarian tensions, it attempted to broaden the existing understanding of this multifaceted phenomenon. By elucidating the inductive concept of ‘eco-sectarianism’, the authors have portrayed the relationship between sectarian radicalisation and the emerging ecological pressures. Although the link between ecological problems and social conflict is well-established, we acknowledge that ecological problems alone cannot trigger sectarian conflicts. However, when destructive ecological problems are fused with other detrimental factors such as social fragmentation, incomplete nation building, uneven development and political mismanagement can set the stage for both politicisation and securitisation of sectarian binaries.

Indeed, pressing environmental conditions have an impact on intercommunal dynamics. When there are extreme ecological and environmental pressures, a strong sense of national consciousness can minimise intercommunal rivalry over vital resources. However, in fragmented nations, where the authorities are mistrusted, sub-state identities surface as lifebelts to fill the void created by the state. The pressing ecological problems strengthen the divisive sectarian narratives, vitalises the politics of ‘other-ing’ and reinforce the socio-religious boundaries of desperate communities who assiduously compete over vital resources

⁵⁹ Ahmad, 26, Sunni Arab, Countryside of Al-Bukamal, 3 October 2016.

and struggle for survival.

In the absence of strong trans-tribal and trans-sectarian pressure groups - and any other effective institutions of civil society – ethnic or sectarian identities horizontally bind individuals together and frame their demands within a one-dimensional and seemingly legitimate framework. Vertical state institutions often lack legitimacy to provide an effective counter-narrative. Sectarian narratives reframe the struggle and shift the focus from environmental problems to the historic battle between ‘good’ and ‘evil’. This sense of religious rectitude not only creates powerful mobilisation dynamics but it also provides the sense of ‘rightfulness’ to resort to violence.

It is crucially important to recognise the importance of political representation in diverse and fragmented societies. In the case of Syria, the official power was perceived as monopolised by one group at the expense of others. The feeling of victimhood and misrepresentation of ethno-sectarian groups fuelled social polarisation. In the case of devastating ecological crisis, social polarisation coupled with deep-rooted political issues paved the way to further social fragmentation and group mobilisation in order to compete over recourses.

The recent drought in the Middle East has had detrimental social effects and climate scientists suggest it merely marked the beginning of a cycle of reoccurring prolonged droughts. Numerous climate change studies warn that in the next decades the Middle East will face increasingly bad water shortages. Because of the demographic, historical, economic and political features of the Middle East, these grim predictions can give foreboding for a new era of ‘eco-sectarian’ conflicts.
